HENRY VI
INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS JOLLY

You've directed Marivaux's *Arlequin poli par l'amour* (*Arlequin, refined by love*), Sacha Guitry's *Toâ*, and Mark Ravenhill's *Pool (No Water)*. You'll be presenting the entirety of William Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy at the Festival d'Avignon. Where did this idea come from?

Thomas Jolly: Our company, La Piccola Familia, is made up of six actors, and just like we founded this company together, we create our shows together. We therefore constitute a working group with its own language, its own boundaries. But we felt the need to try for something bigger, to invite other actors in. We barely played *Pool (No Water)*, too. It's a difficult play, rough, that doesn't obey the usual rules of theatre. It made us want to continue that kind of exceptional, long-term adventure. *Henry VI* is a play I'd already worked on during a workshop led by Marie Vayssière at the drama school of the Théâtre National de Bretagne, and it includes the very first play written by Shakespeare. We approached it like a playground, a place of research, and considered that it shows Shakespeare as a young writer still looking for himself, mixing genres and forms—medieval farce and epic tragedy, verse and prose. We were very excited.

What do you find most exciting in this sprawling play?

Shakespeare, behind what looks at first glance like a race for the crown between several pretenders, depicts a time of upheaval on a huge scale. Between the 15th century, the time of Henry VI, and the 16th, that of William Shakespeare, the world has started moving, and isn't showing any sign that it's about to stop. It's a time of great revolutions: the invention of printing, the discovery of the New World, the rise of Protestantism and the religious schisms it leads to. Earth is no longer the centre of the universe and firearms are becoming more sophisticated and more common. The reign of Henry VI is a symbol for change in a time of upheaval and violence. For instance, in the play, there's a petition against the Duke of Suffolk, who appropriated land that originally belonged to the town. This is the beginning of an agricultural capitalism that will lead in turn to the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the political personnel of the time, focused on their personal ambitions, are surprised by the rise of popular revolts.

Isn't King Henry always depicted as pious, gentle, and sensitive?

The King himself is benevolent and just, but his reign is bloody, marked by the Hundred Years' War, the War of the Roses, and popular revolts. And it is in this context of violence that this admirable king will lose his throne to Richard III. Which asks the following question: does one need to be twisted in one's body, in one's mind, and in one's soul to ascend to the throne?

There are precious few women in this play.

As is the case in most historical tragedies. But the few women there are are exceptional. Queen Margaret, who wages war; Joan of Arc, who lives in an exclusively male world she nonetheless manages to dominate for a while; Eleanor who, to establish her husband's power, dabbles in witchcraft; the Countess of Auvergne, a widow who, looking for revenge, sets a trap on her own for Talbot, the English commander, in a magnificent scene.

You often talk of a tetralogy, adding the tragedy *Richard III* to the trilogy.

Yes, because the play depicts a sort of fifty-year crisis that lead to the fall of the good King Henry and the rise of the evil King Richard. Is *Henry VI* a prelude to *Richard III*, or is *Richard III* the epilogue of *Henry VI*? The themes are the same, the state of crisis remains throughout all four plays. A crisis of which the protagonists are aware, just as they are aware of the consequences of their actions, of this race towards progress they can't quite control.

You said you were worried about the classification of artistic projects nowadays. With *Henry VI*, you defy all classifications.

Three plays, fifteen acts, one hundred and fifty characters who will say almost ten thousand lines… I'm very happy about it because it allowed us to escape the philosophy according to which you have to create quickly, the production logic that all too often supersedes our desires. Now I can say: I'm working on a project that will last four years, and I will do everything I can to find ways to fund this initiation journey, to prove that the public doesn't particularly like shows that belong to specific categories and that they can be there to share this journey with us, whether it lasts four, eight, thirteen, or seventeen hours. I think we share this desire with the public. A desire for a gathering, an ephemeral community, a moment of real exchange that we all need. I've read a lot about the research on mirror neurons lately. If you see me move my arm, for instance, the neuron that governs this movement in your brain will fire, regardless of whether or not you moved your arm as well. In our minds, we're doing the same gesture. Maybe people come to the theatre to do the same thing together… to be in empathy.

As regards your theatre, one feels that every new text you direct is also a way for you to do research on how to direct.

Originally, I wanted to be a director to be a sort of "super spectator," to do whatever I wanted… and I've always been fascinated by the black box that is the theatre and by the technical means at its disposal. I don't really like stages without understages and fly systems, without what makes the machinery of theatre. I need those three levels: hell, earth, and heaven, and everything you can do by using them together or separately. Theatricality resides within the inventions that appear in this magical place thanks to the imagination of those who work on it together. Every new show must therefore answer this question: "How are we going to do it with what we have at our disposal?" Choosing *Henry VI* means asking myself questions about what Elizabethan theatre was, about this outdoor performance, visible by everyone, without any artifice but that of the actors.

One still needs some resources to go through this Shakespearean universe made of battles, of ceremonies, of fights, and of moments of royal solemnity.

I have two allies when I want to portray the ceremonial and war: music and lighting. They are very helpful when I come up with my stage designs, those machines for the actors to play with, and when I become the "entremetteur en scène." [1]

Does the title of director make you uncomfortable?

Not really. It all depends on what you mean by it. I think I'm more of a stage manager, as Jean Vilar used to say, or an artistic director, or a company director. My role is to give coherence to the projects the actors, the crew, and myself propose to the public.

Another specificity of many of Shakespeare's histories is that they depict and analyse events that happened barely a century before their writing.

It's amazing. Shakespeare was largely inspired by Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which had just been published. What he does is almost documentary theatre. It's this excessiveness that I like. Those plays overcome their immediacy and their realism by treating timeless themes in a language that is unique.

But Shakespeare takes a lot of liberties with History.

This is obvious when you look at his Joan of Arc, a prostitute who dabbles in witchcraft, or at his King Charles, pretentious and full of himself, which matches neither the image we have of him nor the accounts of the time… But the liberties Shakespeare took with History also allow me to take liberties with the text. As a native of Rouen, I had to have Joan of Arc be burnt at the stake, whereas in the original play she simply disappears… I moved some scenes around, cut some lines and certain characters.

Didn't you even add a character?

Yes, he's there to give the audience temporal markers. He comes back regularly and the audience ends up waiting for him to appear. His role is similar to that of a rhapsodist.

How did you gather the cast you needed for the play?

I took the scene in which the Duke of York presents all the kings and queens and the members of the Houses or York and Lancaster that came before Henry VI. Once I had enough actors to portray all the members of this genealogy, I knew I had enough.

Rumour has it that the play might not have been written entirely by Shakespeare. What do you think, now that you've worked on it?

The first part may seem a little "wobbly." It would be easy to say that the scenes that are well-written were written by Shakespeare, the others by his associates. I prefer to think that this first part is a little archaic and handles the topic of the Hundred Years' War beautifully, and to open the show with this "wonky" part that I believe to be the result of a young writer still trying to find his style.

Victor Hugo, whom you quote yourself, said: "There are two ways to elicit passion in a crowd at the theatre: by showing them a grand spectacle, or by showing them the truth. Spectacle will grab the masses. Truth grabs the individual." With *Henry VI*, is it possible to do both at the same time?

This quote is from the preface to *Marie Tudor*, and I particularly like it because it introduces a distinction between History and stories. With the *Henry VI* trilogy, then with *Richard III*, we have a progression in what I think is a tetralogy. The story of two kingdoms at war becomes the story of one kingdom, then the story of two families at war, the York

and the Lancaster, becomes the story of the war of one family, until we get to the specific story of the war of Richard III! We have both spectacle and truth here, with a shift towards the intimate.

How do you project on today's world those stories of rivalries and chaos that seem so closely tied to the power of the king?

I think it is easy to think about the nature of power in a democracy like ours. When we began this project, in 2009, I used to insist on the fact that King Henry VI is trying to project the image of a "normal" king, close to his people, trying to rule for the people. And we were surprised when the Presidential electoral campaign then used the word "normal." It seems to me that we have a problem with the idea of handing power to someone who looks like us, a common man. Or rather, there's an ambiguity in our desires, because we dream of being represented by a man who would be like us, but when that happens we accuse him of being like us and not to act like we believe someone in a position we deem superior should.

Doesn't Henry VI make it worse on himself by being at once there and not there?

Yes, and it's why you need a moony actor to play him, not a solar one. This king almost never speaks to the people around him, he seems to be forever daydreaming, even when tragedy strikes. There's an innocence to this man who became king when he was only nine months old, at the wrong time, at a time when all the lords who had been busy fighting in the Hundred Years' War come back to England and to politics. Back then a war abroad was already the perfect distraction from internal problems…

Shakespeare could teach us a thing or two about political practices.

He asks questions and offers examples. He doesn't dumb down what he's saying and highlights contradictions. Henry VI isn't some nice and simple-minded king who is in over his head, but a king who carries within himself a utopia. He is like a child who gets the better of adults.

1. "Mediator en scène," a pun on the French word for director.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.